

WHEN WAS JOHN KNOX BORN?

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DISPUTATION regarding the year of John Knox's birth has arisen in recent time, and occupied special attention during the celebration of his Quatercentenary in 1905. The question is of considerable interest on account of its bearing on several particulars of the Reformer's life and work. Knox admittedly died on November 24, 1572. Was he born in 1505,¹ the year which until recently was generally accepted, or at some later date between November 24, 1513 and November 24, 1516?

I

The early date rests on the three-fold apparent testimony of (1) Archbishop Spottiswoode in his *History of the Church of Scotland*, first published in 1655, sixteen years after the author's death.² (2) David Buchanan in his *Life and Death of John Knox*, first published in 1644. (3) The *Munimenta* of Glasgow University,³ which record the entrance of a John Knox into that university in 1522, when John Mair or Major, one of Knox's academic instructors, was occupying there a theological chair—a date obviously harmonising with the testimony to Knox's birth in 1505 seventeen years before.

Regarding the third testimony, however, it has been ascertained that, during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, no fewer than forty Knoxes, of whom eight were called *John*, studied at Glasgow University; so that the identification of an entrant named John Knox in 1522 with our Reformer is in itself no more than possible, and is rendered improbable—(a) by the fact that until early in the nineteenth century, when Dr Thomas M'Crie found the name in the Glasgow University Register of 1522, our Reformer's academic connection with Glasgow had never been referred to by any writer; (b) by the testimony of Theodore Beza, Knox's personal friend, followed by David Buchanan, that Knox was a student at St Andrews, near his own home,

¹ No record of the particular month is known.

² Second Edition, published in 1666, p. 267: Modern Edition, II, 180.

³ *Records Univ., Glasgow*, II, 147.

under John Major, who held office there from 1523 to 1525, and from 1531 to 1550.¹

As regards the testimony of David Buchanan, there is evidence that this writer borrowed matter relating to Knox from Archbishop Spottiswoode's work. Buchanan, indeed, published his *Life of Knox* in 1644, eleven years before the publication of Spottiswoode's *History of the Church*, but also five years after that historian's death; and that Buchanan had access to Spottiswoode's unpublished manuscript previous to the publication of his (Buchanan's) own work, is rendered practically certain by the fact that Principal Robert Baillie, a friend of David Buchanan, in his *Historical Vindication*, published in 1646, refers to Spottiswoode's then unpublished *History*, showing that he had by that time examined the *History*, or at least had become acquainted with its contents in so far as these referred to Knox. Accordingly, aware, as Baillie must have been, that Buchanan was preparing a revision of Knox's *History of the Reformation*, along with a *Life of the Reformer* prefixed, he (Baillie) could hardly have omitted to obtain for his friend a perusal of Spottiswoode's manuscript. That David Buchanan saw the Archbishop's *History* before publishing his own work, appears also from a comparison of several details in the two publications. Thus, Buchanan's statement that "under Master John Mair [or Major] a man famous for his learning, Knox became so proficient that he was advanced to Church Orders before the time usually allowed," is an apparent repetition of Spottiswoode's declaration that Knox "made such profit in his studies under that famous Doctor Mr John Major, that he was held worthy to enter into Orders before the years allowed." Also Buchanan's words: "He [Knox] betook himself to the reading of the ancients, especially of Augustine, and was exceedingly solaced," seem to echo Spottiswoode's testimony that "by reading the ancients, especially the works of St Austin, he was brought to a knowledge of the truth." Further, when Buchanan writes of Knox: "Never was a man more observant of the time and just authority of the Church's rulers, according to the Word of God," we have here an apparent and significant modification of Spottiswoode's statement: "Never was any man more observant than he [Knox], always urging the obedience of ministers to their Superintendents."²

It thus appears that Buchanan's adoption of 1505 as the year of Knox's birth—cannot be confidently claimed as independent testimony, and maybe no more than the acceptance of Spottiswoode's really prior,

¹ See Æneas J. G. Mackay's *Life of Major*, pp. x, lxvii, ciii, cxii prefixed to Major's *History of Greater Britain* (1892).

² See Spottiswoode's *History*, Second Edition (1666), p. 266, and David Buchanan's *Life and Death of Knox*, *ut supra*.

although subsequently published, record. The Archbishop's published *History*, accordingly, in which the statement occurs, that Knox died in November 1572, "in the 67th year of his age," becomes the single original and definite authority for assigning the Reformer's birth to 1505.

II

Against Spottiswoode's apparent declaration must be placed the testimony of two contemporaries and personal friends of Knox; whereas Spottiswoode, although the son of a contemporary and colleague of the Reformer (viz. John Spottiswoode, Superintendent of Lothian in the early Reformed Scottish Church), was himself only seven years of age when Knox died, and moreover composed his *History* late in life. The two contemporary friends of Knox referred to were Sir Peter Young of Edinburgh, and Theodore Beza of Geneva.

(1) Sir Peter Young wrote to Beza in 1579, seven years only after Knox's death in Edinburgh, a letter, which, after being long lost, was discovered about thirty years ago at Gotha, and was published by the late Professor Hume Brown.¹ This letter states that Knox died "on the 24th of November 1572 in his 59th year"; and he must therefore (if the statement be correct) have been born at some date between November 24, 1513 and November 24, 1514.

(2) Theodore Beza presumably became acquainted with Knox during the several years when both these Protestant leaders lived in French Switzerland. Beza, who in one of his Epistles (I, 79) addresses Knox as "My Knox, my very dear brother," states in his *Icones*, published in 1580² that Knox died after completing the age of 57; in which case his birth would have taken place some time, but not long before November 24, 1515. Now, we can understand either or both of these two writers mistaking the date of their friend's birth and his age at death by a year or even by two years, but that both of them should have miscalculated his age to the extent of eight, nine, or ten years is scarcely credible. Especially is this the case, as in 1579, when Young wrote, he was junior colleague of George Buchanan (the historian) in King James VI's household, and therefore not likely to have written to Beza about Knox's age (at least if any doubt existed on the subject) without consulting Buchanan, Knox's intimate friend. George Buchanan himself was born in 1506 and surely could not mistake Knox's age by eight or more years. In like manner Beza, who, after Knox's final departure from Geneva to Scotland in 1559, kept up correspondence with him,³ might very well have represented inaccurately the Scottish Reformer as dying after com-

¹ *John Knox, a Biography*, II, 322.

² *Icones*, Ee, III.

³ See Laing, *Knox*, VI, 562, 613.

pleting his 57th year, but could hardly have declared his "*dear brother*," with whom he was intimate, to have been about nine years younger than he really was.

III

Apart from the evidence supplied by Young and Beza, several considerations point to the later date assigned by them to Knox's birth as more credible than the earlier.

(1) Not only Beza, but David Buchanan also, as we have seen, states that Knox was a student at St Andrews under Major, whose later and longer residence there extended from 1531 to 1550; and it is notable that in Knox's *History of the Reformation in Scotland*¹ the account of what took place at St Andrews during the earlier years of that period is particularly full and graphic. It included (a) a remarkable private interview between a reforming friar, Airth, and John Major, the latter of whom, although on the whole a staunch Roman Catholic, is stated to have concurred with Airth in denunciation of clerical abuses, and to have promised to defend him against the charge of heresy; (b) *detailed* reports of sermons preached at that time by Friars Airth and Seton, who both soon after had to flee to England. In reading this portion of Knox's *History*, one receives the impression that the writer is drawing materials from the storehouse of his personal reminiscences. And if so, then the view, that Knox was born so early as 1505, would contradict Spottiswoode's declaration above noted that the Reformer had completed his academic course and had received ordination to the priesthood at some time before reaching the usual age of twenty-five.

(2) If Knox was born between the close of 1513 and that of 1515, and if accordingly his alleged academic connection with Glasgow in 1522 must give place to later student life at St Andrews, near his own home at or near Haddington, then his lack of keen interest, otherwise somewhat strange, in Glasgow, during after life, becomes more natural; while his warm attachment afterwards to St Andrews and frequent residence there are fully explained. The omission of his name from extant ancient lists of St Andrews *alumni* is not significant; for Dr Hay Fleming, after personal examination of these, has shown that such omissions were quite frequent: and the present writer after similar inspection of relative documents confirms that testimony. Thus, in 1529, for example, only three "incorporations" of students are recorded, compared with about forty in 1528 and also in 1530.

(3) Knox's attitude of humble discipleship towards George Wishart, and his practice of accompanying that Reformer with a "two-handed"

¹ See Laing, *Knox*, I, 36-47.

sword as his armed attendant,¹ are more natural if Wishart, whose birth is generally assigned to the year 1513,² was not Knox's junior by about eight years, but at least as old as, and possibly a year or two older than, his loyal follower.

IV

It may be asked, however, How came Archbishop Spottiswoode apparently to assign Knox's birth to the year 1505, if it really took place about nine or ten years later?

An adequate explanation was supplied twenty-one years ago by Dr Hay Fleming, to whose researches and expositions the History of the Scottish Reformation otherwise owes so much. In the *Bookman* for September 1905, Dr Fleming, after careful examination of manuscripts, gave good reason for holding that the eventual ascription of the date 1505 to Spottiswoode as chief authority was due partly to the Archbishop's "small" and "not easily read" handwriting, and partly to a mistake made by an early re-transcriber of a manuscript of Spottiswoode's *History*. For, while the earliest *printed* editions of that work from 1655 onwards (published after the author had passed away) record Knox's death in 1572 as being "in his 67th year," on the other hand, the earliest extant manuscript, now in the Advocates' Library in Edinburgh, stated *originally*, as Dr Fleming, after careful inspection, discovered and testifies, that Knox died in his 57th year. This transcriber's figure 5 was found by Dr Fleming to have been "plainly made"; but the Archbishop, when revising and modifying this portion of the manuscript (for a purpose quite unconnected with the exact date of Knox's birth) *re-wrote* four sentences in the margin, including the figures 57, but with the 5 "abnormally formed." "Where the straight stroke of the figure 5 joins the curved one, there is a round loop; and the final letter of his interlinear had crosses and partly hides the lower part of the figure. The consequence has been that when the transcriber made a clean copy, he did not observe the tail of the 5, and as it had no flag, he mistook it for a 6." The error which thus crept into this part of Spottiswoode's manuscript work, was reproduced in subsequent transcripts, and was eventually embodied in the printed text.

Most readers interested in the subject will agree with the late Principal Lindsay³ in holding that Dr Hay Fleming has so far settled the vexed question of the date, to the extent, at least, of negating the early date of 1505.

There remains the less important question whether (1) as Spottis-

¹ Knox's *History*, I, 136.

² Rogers' *Life of Wishart*, p. 6.

³ *Hist. Reformation*, II, 285.

woode is now shown to testify, Knox died in his 57th year, and thus was born at some date after November 24, 1515, but prior to November 24, 1516; or (2) whether as Beza states, Knox died after completing his 57th year, and therefore would be born prior, but not long prior, to November 24, 1515; or (3) whether, as Peter Young declares, Knox died in his 59th year and would thus be born between November 24, 1513, and November 24, 1514.

The decision of *this* less important question must be postponed until some fresh contemporary evidence, supplementary to that of the recently discovered letter of Sir Peter Young, has been received. The recovery of such further evidence is far from impossible. For in Young's letter to Beza, the former prepared the latter for the reception of a communication from James Lawson, Knox's intimate friend, and his successor in St Giles' Church—a document which, if actually sent, has disappeared, but whose recovery would probably supply ground for deciding which of the three above-noted statements ought to be received as reliable.¹

V

For several reasons the substantial agreement now obtained in favour of a considerably later date is of interest and even of value.

(1) A reason for distrusting the reliability of testimony given by early Scottish Post-Reformation writers is thus removed. Such distrust might well have been felt, if it had been shown that these early writers differed very substantially on so notable a point as the time of Knox's birth and his age at death.

(2) As regards Knox's second marriage in 1564, it may be granted that there was nothing morally wrong, or even, in that age at least, discreditable in our Reformer marrying at the age of 59 a young "pious woman," as she is called, of seventeen, Margaret Stewart, daughter of Lord Ochiltree. It is notable that Mary Queen of Scots, amid her strong desire to disparage Knox, refrained from criticising his marriage to so young a bride, although she "stormed wonderfully" at his presumption in marrying a lady of royal "blood and name."² "The whole business of marrying," writes Hume Brown, "and of giving in marriage, was then carried out in a fashion that is apt to revolt the better feeling of the present day."³ Knox, also, had no worldly motive in arranging this wedlock, for Lord Ochiltree was not well off, and afterwards borrowed money from this son-in-law. Moreover, as a widower left with two boys, only six and seven years of age,

¹ In his letter to Beza, Sir Peter Young writes significantly (referring to Knox): "*Ejus integram historiam a Lausonio expectabis*"—Hume Brown's *John Knox*, II, 323.

² Laing's *Knox*, VI, 533.

³ Hume Brown, *Knox*, II, 201.

the Reformer may well have felt the desirability of obtaining a young step-mother who would take sympathetic as well as parental care of these children, and he could not count upon his first wife's relatives permanently fulfilling this charge. Still, after all, admirers of Knox cannot but feel somewhat, even although not altogether relieved, on finding what Dr Hay Fleming has enabled us to know, that in 1564, the year of his second marriage, John Knox was not 59 years old, but only about 49 or 50 ; and it is only fair to add, in justification so far of the wedlock, that reliable testimony is borne to Margaret Stewart's faithful and truly religious fulfilment of wifely duty.¹

(3) While we may not go the length of censuring Knox for his long apparent lukewarmness about Scottish Religious Reformation and for the delay in his public profession of Protestantism until he had reached the age of forty (*i.e.* in the event of his birth having taken place in 1505), still one can consider his procedure more creditable, as well as more credible, if he was little over 30, when the decision was made by him in 1545 publicly to take part in the burning question of the time, and thus to prepare for his eventual leadership of the Scottish Reform Cause.

¹ Laing, VI, 654-5.

